DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 395 508 FL 023 857

AUTHOR Chan, Carol Y. M.
TITLE Cultural Semantics in a Second-Language Text.
PUB DATE 96
NOTE 15p.; For complete volume, see FL 023 856.
PUB TYPE Journal Articles (080) -- Information Analyses (070)
JOURNAL CIT Edinburgh Working Papers in Applied Linguistics; n7 p1-13 1996

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Chinese; *Coherence; *Cultural Awareness; Discourse Analysis; Foreign Countries; Linguistic Theory; Pragmatics; Second Language Learning; Semantics; Writing (Composition); *Written Language

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the theory of prototype semantics as a useful approach to understanding the relationship between language and culture in second-language texts as it relates word-meaning to social and cultural models. Second-language writing in English may use the same linguistic structures as first-language texts, but the significance of individual words often depends greatly on the underlying cultural understanding of cultural frameworks. An example of a second-language text, written by a Chinese-American female, is analyzed to demonstrate how prototypical meanings can be evoked and how they contribute to narrative significance. The analysis of this Chinese, second-language text reveals that a prototypical meaning based on a specific cultural model can serve as the basis for culturally significant meanings in the text; cultural sayings serve as sources of cultural assumptions in the Chinese legend of Fa Mu Lan and the negative stereotyping of Chinese daughters. Semantic prototype theory draws attention to the models underlying the meaning of words to remind that one must look beyond dictionary definitions to see how different cultures apply linguistic labels to descriptions of reality. It also suggests that semantic prototypes are some of the forms that cultural meanings may take. (Contains 20 references.) (NAV)

Cultural Semantics in a Second-Language Text

Carol Y. Chan (DAL)

CULTURAL SEMANTICS IN A SECOND-LANGUAGE TEXT

Carol Y. M. Chan (DAL)

Abstract

Second-language writing in English may use the same linguistic structures as first-language texts. However, the significance of individual words often depends greatly on the underlying cultural frameworks. This paper presents the theory of prototype semantics as a useful approach to understanding the relationship between language and culture in second-language texts since it relates word-meaning to social and cultural models. An example of a second-language text is analyzed to demonstrate how prototypical meanings can be evoked and how they contribute to narrative significance. The analysis of this second-language text reveals that a prototypical meaning based on a specific cultural model can serve as the basis for culturally significant meanings in the text.

1. Introduction

The globalization of English has been accompanied by an upsurge of writing in English by non-native and second-language speakers. Examples from minority and post-colonial literature reveal the use of a non-native language in native contexts which is akin to 'redefining the semantic and semiotic potential of a language, making a language mean something which is not part of its traditional"meaning"' (Kachru 1982: 341). This is because, in seeking to portray non-English sensibilities and local realities, such texts do not simply draw unquestioningly upon the resources of one code, they must achieve control over it in the ways described by the Singaporean poet, Edwin Thumboo:

> Mastering it [the English language] involves holding down and breaching a body of habitual English associations to secure the condition of verbal freedom cardinal to energetic, resourceful writing. (1976: ix)

Thus, choosing a non-native language for self-expression involves contending with the cultural meanings already encoded in linguistic items. In addition, the lack of language structures and meaningful associations pertaining to the non-native speaker's cultural reality must also be overcome. Like Kachru, Thumboo describes the process in terms of remaking a language and 'adjusting the interior landscape of words in order to explore and mediate the permutations of another culture and environment' (ibid).

A study of such works can therefore contribute significantly to an understanding of the relationship between language and culture, not least in the development of second-language proficiency and the expression of the speaker's own native identity. With the spread of English across cultures and the resurgent interest in the role of culture in English language teaching, analysis of second-language written texts can add new insight into the ways culture influences and is expressed through language.

2. Communication and culture

2.1 Using a second language

The difficulties faced by the post-colonial writer underscore the fact that languages are social systems structured and maintained by societies, situated within particular cultural contexts. As Lyons states, self-expression through language is 'very largely controlled by socially imposed and socially recognised norms of behaviour and categorisation' (1981: 144). With the spread of English as a world language, communities which do not identify with British norms tend to subvert them in order to impose their own non-English patterns of usage, giving rise to varieties such as Indian, Australian, and Nigerian English.

This adaptation of English across cultures would not be possible without the creative quality of language. It is this quality that allows second-language speakers to generate new linguistic structures, or to adapt familiar

linguistic structures for the expression of unfamiliar concepts. In the process, they achieve a form of translation which involves encoding concepts that are not part of the meaning system of a language, and hence, the possibility of cross-cultural communication.

However, the manipulation of linguistic structures does not guarantee successful cross-cultural communication. For example, Western readers may still not recognise the cultural import of certain linguistic items in a story by a Chinese author, even though the text is in English. The cultural connotations of linguistic items often depend on prototypical usages of such terms within a particular linguistic community. These prototypical usages may be carried over into the second-language text, when the second-language writer attempts to communicate some aspects of his or her native cultural reality using equivalent terms in English. In the process, he or she reorganises or extends the meanings of linguistic items, so that they can convey more or other than their habitual, *taken-for-granted* meanings.

This paper seeks to examine one of the ways by which cultural meanings are conveyed through a second-language. It will focus on the role of prototypical cultural meanings for the interpretation of second-language writing in English. The insights afforded by studies of prototype semantics will be applied to an analysis of a narrative by Maxine Hong Kingston.

2.2 A definition of culture

Culture is often identified with the behaviour, the rituals or ceremonies, the songs, dances, narratives, and other cultural products of individual societies. In this paper, we shall adopt a cognitive view of culture, as found in Holland and Quinn's succinct definition of culture as 'shared presuppositions about the world' (1987: vii). This view defines culture as knowledge, both practical and propositional, acquired through membership of a particular community. Lyons notes that 'as far as propositional knowledge is concerned, it is the fact that something is held to be true that counts, not its actual truth or falsity' (1981:302). Thus, while cultural knowledge may consist of knowledge about the real world, it also includes assumptions, which do not correspond to reality or only in varying degrees. When we refer to cultural meaning expressed through language, we mean this body of shared knowledge, both factual and assumed.

3. Semantic prototypes

3.1 Culture in meaning construction

Recent studies of word meaning recognize the roles of culture and cognition in meaning construction. Traditionally, the study of lexical meaning or semantics attempts to determine the meaning of a lexeme in terms of sense - its relationship with other lexemes - and denotation - its relationship with the outside world. While the distinctions of sense and denotation are helpful, determining word meaning solely in these terms will be of limited value because it is based upon the assumption that the relationship between things and words is direct and uniform. Lexical non-isomorphism reflects the fact that lexemes in one language tend not to have the same denotation as those in another language. For example, in Chinese, the words 桌子 [zhuo zi][1] denote either a table or desk, and speakers would only go to the trouble of referring to the latter as 书桌 [shu zhuo] if they wanted to be specific in cases of ambiguity; an English speaker, on the other hand, would habitually use two distinct labels for these objects.

The meaning of lexemes denoting abstract concepts, such as *kinship*, *beauty*, and *anger*, depends even more greatly upon the cultural context in which they are used since our understanding of them is based upon socially transmitted knowledge. As Wierzbicka emphasizes, in her study of semantics in relation to culture and cognition:

> ... language doesn't reflect the world directly: it reflects human conceptualization, human interpretation of the world. (1992: 7)

Thus, the different cultural interpretations of a label, such as *the most beautiful woman*, depend upon how individual societies define beauty. This difference reflects the fact that, in general, lexical structures of languages are governed by 'culturally important distinctions among classes of entities' (Lyons 1981: 153).

One way of examining these cultural distinctions is by applying the theory of prototype semantics. Studies by Fillmore, Sweetser and Lakoff demonstrate the influence of prototype semantics in our use of language. Essentially, prototype semantics views word-meaning 'as determined by a central or prototypical application' (Sweetser 1987: 43).[2] By relating real-world cases to a best instance of word-usage and by highlighting the underlying role of cultural models in theories of word definition, prototype semantics recognises the crucial fact that words do not exist in a vacuum, but are grounded in the speaker's world.

3.2 Fillmore (1975)

In his analysis of the English noun *bachelor*, Fillmore (1975) argues that the traditional definition of *bachelor* as an unmarried adult man is inadequate because it cannot explain why some unmarried men, such as the pope, Tarzan, or a male partner in a long-term relationship, are not described as bachelors. As an alternative, he proposes that when speakers use the word *bachelor*, they think in terms of a context with certain expectations about marriage and the marriageable age. Thus, the word *bachelor* 'frames' (Fillmore's term) a simplified world of prototypical events: men marry at a certain age and marriages last for life. In such a world, a bachelor is a man who stays unmarried beyond the usual marriageable age, and becomes eminently marriageable. As popes, Tarzans and males in long-term unmarried couplings do not belong in such simplified worlds, they are not regarded as prototypical bachelors. Thus, Fillmore demonstrates that conventional definitions are often related to cultural prototypes. By highlighting the role of conceptual models in language usage, Fillmore's frame semantics indicates one of the ways in which we can account for the prototypical meanings of words when used by different societies.

3.3 Sweetser (1987)

Sweetser's analysis of the English word *lie* (1987) similarly argues against traditional semantics that tends to rely on 'checklist feature definitions' as they do not allow for gradations within a category denoted by a word. As Sweetser notes, lexical categories can have 'better or worse members, or *partial* members' (1987: 43). Thus, the category denoted by the English word *lie* includes white lies, social lies, tall tales, fibs, and other better or worse examples of the prototypical lie. Moreover, although a lie is conventionally defined as a false statement, factual falsity is actually the least important definitional feature in relation to less prototypical examples of lies. Such an anomaly suggests that the dictionary definition of *lie* in terms of falsity is only valid in a simplified world.

Sweetser proposes that the prototypical and non-prototypical cases of the English word *lie* can only be fully understood in relation to a cultural model of language and information. In this cultural model, language is assumed to be informational and helpful in the unmarked discourse mode. She describes the informational model of knowledge as a series of assumptions and rules:

A norm-establishing 'meta-maxim':

(0) People normally obey rules

General cooperative rule:

(1) ***Rule***: Try to help, not harm.

(2) Knowledge is beneficial, helpful.

Combining belief (2) with rule (1) gives rise to:

(3) ***Rule***: Give knowledge (inform others); do not misinform.

From the model of knowledge and information:

(4) Beliefs have adequate justification.

(5) Adequately justified beliefs are knowledge (= are true).

(6) Therefore, beliefs are true.

(6) allows rule (3) to be reinterpreted as:

(7) ***Rule***: Say what you believe (since belief = knowledge); do not say what you do not believe (this = misinformation)

(Adapted from Sweetser 1987: 47)

Thus, according to this cultural model, speakers are assumed to be helpful, and will only communicate what they believe to be true. Consequently, hearers are normally ready to accept what is said to them; they only question the truth of a statement when they fear that their simplified discourse world does not correspond to reality, for instance when the source is naive, misinformed or wanting to deceive. Deviations from the prototypical lie can be accounted for in relation to the disruption or bending of informational exchange rules.

As Sweetser demonstrates, cultural models of information and discourse explain why in actual usage, the English word *lie* is much more complex than its straightforward definition as a false statement. She also briefly examines the presence of such models in the Malagasy and Lebanese communities and concludes that although these cultures differ quite significantly from that of the English speaking community, they have 'similar understandings of lying and of the general power and morality dimensions of informational exchange' (Sweetser 1987: 62).

3.4 Lakoff (1987)

Lakoff elaborates on the function of prototypes in his theory of idealized cognitive models (1987). Idealized cognitive models structure mental space, which are 'like possible worlds in that they can be taken as representing our understanding of hypothetical and fictional situations' (Lakoff 1987: 282). The simplified world described by Fillmore to account for the prototypical case of bachelor is an example of an idealized cognitive model. Similarly, Sweetser's description of the informational model of discourse is a more complex example.

In his discussion of the category defined by the lexeme *mother*, Lakoff (1987: 74 - 76) provides an interesting example of how a cluster of converging idealized cognitive models can give rise to prototype effects. The classical definition of *mother* is a woman who has given birth to a child. However, such a definition ignores other meanings associated with motherhood, which Lakoff describes in terms of models:

The genetic model: the female who contributes the genetic material is the mother

The nurturance model: the female adult who nurtures and raises a child is the mother

The marital model: the wife of the father is the mother

The genealogical model: the closest female ancestor is the mother

(Lakoff 1987: 74)

Lakoff demonstrates that the concept of mother involves all of these individual models, which converge to form a concept of mother which is psychologically more basic than the models taken individually. The point of convergence gives rise to the prototypical concept of *mother*.

What is particularly relevant to our discussion is Lakoff's explanation of social stereotypes, which are important in defining cultural expectations. In his analysis of the category denoted by the linguistic label *housewife*, he observes that the housewife stereotype arises from a stereotypical view of nurturance, associated with the nurturance model of mother. According to this view, housewives are mothers who are

able to provide the best care for their children because they remain at home all the time. Thus, stereotypes are examples of prototype effects.

Lakoff characterizes social stereotypes in the following manner:

> Social stereotypes are cases of metonymy - where a subcategory has a socially recognized status as standing for the category as a whole, usually for the purpose of making quick judgments about people. (1987: 79)

Since stereotypes have a role in characterizing concepts and defining society's expectations, they affect the meaning value attached to particular linguistic labels. For example, consider the connotations attached to the noun phrase *the working mother*. As Lakoff explains, the category denoted by *the working mother* is not simply a mother who happens to be working; instead one of the ways it is conventionally defined is in contrast to the stereotypical housewife-mother, with the result that the working mother is negatively viewed as one who cannot provide the best care for her children because she is not at home all the time.[3] Thus, prototypes can be defined against other prototypes.

3.5 Prototype theory for analyzing written texts

The studies by Fillmore, Sweetser, and Lakoff focus on individual lexemes in an attempt to discover the cultural and social frameworks that explain their actual usage. They demonstrate that the meanings of these linguistic items are influenced by prototypes arising from particular cognitive models or simplified representations of situations in the social worlds of the language-user.

Second-language written texts are framed by cultural contexts that differ significantly from those of texts written by Anglo-American writers, for whom English is a first language. If, as prototype semantics suggests, word meaning is characterized by prototypicality through the influence of underlying cultural models, then one approach to discovering the culturally significant meanings in second-language texts is through an examination of the way prototypical meanings are encoded, evoked, and exploited.

In this paper, I would like to argue that the theory of prototype semantics provides us with a means of understanding the generation of cultural meanings in second-language written texts. In order to do so, I shall examine some of the prototypical meanings generated by a second-language text in English and its relationship to an underlying cultural model. The significance of this prototypical meaning is then perceived in terms of the narrative structure of the text.

4. 'White Tigers'

4.1 Choice of text

'White Tigers' comes from a collection of five narratives, entitled The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts (1976), by Maxine Hong Kingston. It represents a piece of genuine second-language data as Kingston's first language is a Chinese dialect of Canton and she only acquired English as a second language in school. However, she chooses to write in English and her mastery of the language is evident in the creative manipulation of language structures in her text. For example, she presents the Chinese legend of the female warrior Fa Mu Lan in the form of a first person narrative, which effectively allows her to assume the identity of the heroine.

The autobiographical text recounts the author's experiences as a first-generation Chinese American. An important theme is the influence of traditional Chinese values on Kingston's perception of herself as a Chinese female child. The two ways in which the text evokes a cultural framework are: by the incorporation of Chinese sayings and by the retelling of a Chinese legend. Through the traditional Chinese sayings, we come to understand one of the prototypical meanings associated with the Chinese female child. They also enable readers to understand the significance of the legend of Fa Mu Lan, the heroine who achieves lasting fame by taking her father's place in battle in an act of filial duty. Kingston's retelling of the legend depends significantly on the cultural prototype evoked through the Chinese sayings.

The choice of this text is motivated by the fact that it represents a sophisticated piece of second-language writing that explicitly draws on cultural concepts and evokes a cultural framework. While this type of text may seem less susceptible to cross-cultural misinterpretation, the care with which it establishes and relies upon a specific cultural prototype for narrative significance emphasizes that the interpretation of second-language texts may depend heavily on the reader's awareness of such prototypical meanings and the extent to which the writer provides access to them.

4.2 A Summary of 'White Tigers'

'White Tigers' consists of three sections, clearly marked in the text by line spacing separating the sections. The Chinese sayings occur in the second and third sections. The first section highlights the influence of stories about Chinese female warriors on Kingston's perception of women's roles in Chinese culture and narrates the beginning of the legend of Fa Mu Lan as imagined by Kingston. The second section, which is also the longest of the three, is a first-person narration of the legend of Fa Mu Lan. It describes the fifteen years of training endured by the heroine on a mythical mountain, her return to save her father from being conscripted, her donning of men's armour, her successes in battle, her revenge on those who had exploited her family and her country, and finally, her reunion with her husband and his family. The final section reverts back to the reality of Kingston's experience as an American Chinese and her failure to achieve success according to the ideal of filial duty defined by the legend and conveyed indirectly through the Chinese sayings.

5. Language and culture in the text

5.1 Transmitting culture through language

'White Tigers' begins by emphasizing the importance of language in the transmission of culture:

> When we Chinese girls listened to the adults talking-story, we learned that we failed if we grew up to be but wives or slaves. We could be heroines, swordswomen. (Kingston 1976: 19)

Here, Kingston refers to the popular Chinese pastime of storytelling, which not only entertains its listeners but communicates and promotes cultural values. The stories and legends of China recounted by the Chinese in America thus played a crucial role in defining cultural expectations for Kingston, and she signifies the importance of such language use with the original compound verb-noun 'talking-story'.

The opening sentences of 'White Tigers' also highlight the focus of our analysis: some of the cultural meanings associated with the lexemes *daughter* and *girl* in the text. Taking note of Quinn and Holland's observation that cultural knowledge is 'learned from others, in large part from their talk' (1987: 22), our analysis begins by examining the Chinese sayings recorded in 'White Tigers' as examples of language functioning as cultural instruction in the text.

5.2 Analysis of Chinese sayings in the text

Analyzing the Chinese sayings in terms of illocutionary acts and perlocutionary effects associated with utterances (Austin 1962) reveals some of their pragmatic functions. In the following passage from the second section of 'White Tigers', the two underlined Chinese sayings are quoted by a corrupt man to justify his exploitation of females:

> "Oh, come now. Everyone takes the girls when he can. The families are glad to be rid of them. '<u>Girls are maggots in the rice</u>.' '<u>It is more profitable to raise geese than daughters</u>.'" He quoted me the sayings I hated. (Kingston 1976: 43. Emphasis mine)

The illocutionary force of the sayings is directed towards justification and agreement, and relies upon the assumption and acknowledgement of their status as pieces of cultural wisdom. However, their perlocutionary effect is to anger the listener, Fa Mu Lan, whom the speaker mistakenly regards as a male.

The next passage, from the third section of 'White Tigers', presents three Chinese sayings:

> When one of my parents or the emigrant villagers said, "Feeding girls is feeding cowbirds," I would thrash on the floor and scream so hard I couldn't talk. I couldn't stop.
>
> "What's the matter with her?"
>
> "I don't know. Bad I guess. You know how girls are. 'There's no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls.'"
>
> "I would hit her if she were mine. But then there's no use wasting all that discipline on a girl. 'When you raise girls, you're raising children for strangers.'"
>
> (Kingston 1976: 46. Emphasis mine)

The sayings quoted by the emigrant villagers and Kingston's mother have several perlocutionary effects: Kingston is upset by them, which, as a child, she demonstrates by throwing a tantrum; however, their effect on the villagers is to evoke tacit consent and encourage other similar thoughts. Thus, in contrast to the sayings in the previous passage, the illocutionary force of the sayings in this passage succeeds when directed towards a specific audience - the emigrant villagers - since they refer the listeners to common knowledge as a basis for understanding behaviour and justifying action, or, in this case, the absence of action.

Common sayings assume a body of cultural knowledge shared by speakers. Thus, in the above passage, the saying 'There's no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls' is preceded by the sentence 'You know how girls are'; the second-person pronoun in subject position, the predicate 'know', and the non-specific, generic noun 'girls', together contribute to the effect of emphasizing shared knowledge, which the addressee already knows, and the speaker reiterates as a reminder.

In the next two passages, also from the third section of the 'White Tigers', the sayings once again serve as reference points of common knowledge, which is then used to facilitate reasoning and understanding.

> It was said, "There is an outward tendency in females," which meant that I was getting straight A's for the good of my future husband's family, not my own.
>
> (Kingston 1976: 47. Emphasis mine)

> They only say, "When fishing for treasures in the flood, be careful not to pull in girls," because that is what one says about daughters. But I watched such words come out of my own mother's and father's mouths; I looked at their ink drawing of poor people snagging their neighbor's flotage with long flood hooks and pushing the girl babies on down the river. And I had to get out of hating range. (Kingston 1976: 52. Emphasis mine)

The presence of the generic nouns, 'females' and 'girls', as well as the existential 'there', help to raise these sayings to the status of gnomic utterances and collective wisdom. However, close analysis reveals that they convey not proven truths but certain cultural notions about female children. The latter passage indicates that the imagery of one such saying even assumed concrete visual representation in a pen and ink drawing, perhaps as a means of making its meaning explicit and more memorable; the drawing clearly made an indelible impression on Kingston.

5.3 Cultural propositions

Taken together, these sayings build up a picture of how daughters are regarded in Chinese culture, thereby suggesting one cultural framework against which female children are prototypically defined. The cultural framework erected by the Chinese sayings in the text become clearer when their propositions are stated:

irls are maggots in the rice.

The copula 'be' allows girls to be equated with maggots, which should be gotten rid of. as the context of the passage in which this saying appears makes clear.

Girls = maggots in the rice

proposes 1) Girls ruin what is good

2)) Girls should be avoided or removed.

IIa. It is more profitable to raise geese than daughters.

IIb. There's no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls.

IIa and IIb are versions of the same proposition:

Raising geese is more profitable than raising girls.

This proposition implies:

1) Female children are of less value than livestock.

2) They have to be raised but do not bring returns.

III. Feeding girls is feeding cowbirds.

Kingston's reaction to this saying, as described in the passage containing this saying, suggests that cowbirds are viewed positively. Therefore, feeding them would be regarded as a waste of resources.

Feeding girls = feeding cowbirds

implies 1) Rearing female children is a waste of resources.

IV. When you raise girls, you're raising children for strangers.

This saying entails the assumption that female children will be married off and therefore, play no role in maintaining the family name (an important concept in Chinese culture).

Raising daughters = raising children for strangers

implies 1) Daughters only contribute to their husbands' families ('strangers').

2) Daughters contribute little to their own families.

V. There is an outward tendency in females.

Kingston's commentary accompanying this saying reveals it is to be interpreted in the context of marriage, in which a daughter's loyalties and contributions belong to her husband and parents-in-law.The saying is based upon the knowledge that daughters eventually marry outside their clan.[4]

It implies 1) Daughters, their loyalties and contributions, will belong to their husband's family.

and therefore, 2) Females contribute little to their own families.

VI. When fishing for treasures in the flood, be careful not to pull in girls.

Simply put, this saying proposes:

1) Daughters are worthless, useless

and therefore, 2) Having daughters should be avoided.

Representing the sayings in terms of their propositions and implications reveals that they encourage quite horrifying assumptions about and attitudes towards females. In fact, they generate prototype effects in the text by repeatedly emphasizing a negative view of daughters as worthless, bringing little or no benefit to their families. This view is closely linked to the notion of economic gain and practical value.

The traditional prejudices surrounding female children in traditional Chinese culture are well-documented (Hsu 1949, 1981; Lee 1960; Kristeva 1986; Tu 1985; Tsai 1986). According to feudal and Confucian customs, only sons continue the family name and inherit family property. A daughter, on the other hand, is expected to marry into another family; any contributions she makes will be to her husband's family and her sons will bear the father's surname. It also follows from this that raising daughters is a waste of limited resources. In contrast, a son is highly valued and socially significant.

5.4 A prototypical meaning of daughter

Since one of the recurrent propositions generated by the above adages is that female children are worthless, this gives rise to a prototype effect associated with the cultural concept of female children in the text: a daughter is stereotypically perceived in terms of her lack of worth or tangible contribution to the family that raises her. This cultural definition may be represented as:

Daughter = minus Value

Daughters are thus associated with all that is negative, and Kingston draws upon this connotation in the following passage:

> "Stop that crying!" my mother would yell. "I'm going to hit you if you don't stop. Bad girl! Stop!" . . .
>
> "I'm not a bad girl," I would scream. "I'm not a bad girl." I might as well have said, "I'm not a girl." (Kingston 1976: 46)

Kingston's mother uses the adjective 'bad' to mean naughty. Its equivalent in Chinese would be the word 坏 [huai], which carries both the meanings of rotten and naughty. Even as Kingston verbally denies the label *bad girl*, she wryly concludes that this is tantamount to denying her identity as a female. Within a cultural framework in which a female child is prototypically regarded as intrinsically worthless, the adjective 'bad' becomes redundant in collocation with the noun 'girl'. Consequently, one can only deny that one is not a bad girl when one is not a girl, that is, a boy.

If we only relied on dictionary definitions of the lexeme *daughter*, we would lose its cultural import in 'White Tigers'. Understandably, dictionaries tend to restrict themselves to basic definitions of daughter in terms of the relationship between parent and female child. However, as Lyons points out:

> ... many of the concepts with which we operate are culture-bound, in the sense that they depend for their understanding upon socially transmitted knowledge, both practical and propositional, and vary considerably from culture to culture. (1981: 308)

Thus, we need to go beyond the dictionary definition to account for the cultural status (or lack of it) denoted by the nouns *girl* or *daughter*. Kingston's text encourages us to locate their meanings within a cultural matrix, to interpret their significance through the model of traditional Chinese expectations evoked by the traditional sayings, which may or may not correspond to reality but certainly represent a strong cultural influence.

5.5 The legend of Fa Mu Lan

The prototypical meaning of the lexemes *girl* and *daughter* in the framework of traditional Chinese culture arising from the Chinese sayings helps us to relate the Fa Mu Lan legend to Kingston's experiences as an American Chinese. The legend of the woman warrior Fa Mu Lan presents an alternative prototype, a daughter who achieves the status of the valued female child because she fulfils the most important obligation of all Chinese children: filial duty. By retelling the legend in her own words, Kingston seeks to dismantle the negative cultural stereotyping attached to the female child. Thus, it is in her refusing to accede to the cultural expectation that she 'would grow up a wife and a slave' (Kingston 1976: 20), that Kingston chooses the alternative definition of *daughter* articulated through the song of the warrior woman:

> She said I would grow up a wife and a slave, but she taught me the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan. I would have to grow up a warrior woman.
>
> (Kingston 1976: 20)

The impact of this legend sung to Kingston by her mother suggests once again the efficacy of language in transmitting cultural values.

However, even though the legend of Fa Mu Lan represents a Chinese female who manages to escape the negative status accorded to a Chinese female, it upholds the cultural roles expected of females. The fact that Fa Mu Lan can only achieve her battle victories disguised as a man underscores the traditional stereotyping of male and female. Moreover, while she manages to rise above the prototypical definition of women as unvalued daughters, she fulfils all the cultural duties by becoming a wife, bearing a son, and returning to her parents-in-law as a dutiful daughter in the end:

> Wearing my black embroidered wedding coat, I knelt at my parents-in-law's feet, as I would have done as a bride. "Now my public duties are finished," I said. "I will stay with you, doing farmwork and housework, and giving you more sons."
>
> (Kingston 1976: 45)

Hence, Fa Mu Lan's legendary status is partially derived from her ability to accomplish what is expected of the Chinese female.

Kingston's retelling of the legend of Fa Mu Lan is rendered unusual by the use of first-person narration. This effectively allows her to narrate the legend as her own story, merging her identity with that of the warrior woman. The legend thus becomes a form of autobiography, not only enabling Kingston to incorporate elements from her own life into the story but also to express her own awareness and implicit desire to match cultural norms and aspirations. This awareness is indicated through the pattern of modals in the narrative. For example, in a passage describing the heroine's choice between returning to her family or staying on the mountain to undergo training, there is a repeated use of the modal 'can':

> "What do you want to do?" the old man asked. "You can go back right now if you like. You can go pull sweet potatoes, or you can stay with us and learn how to fight barbarians and bandits."

"You can avenge your village," said the old woman. "You can recapture the harvests that the thieves have taken. You can be remembered by the Han people for your dutifulness." (Kingston 1976: 22-23. Emphasis mine)

Here, the modal 'can' expresses possibility and permission: both sets of choices (to go back and work on the farm versus learning to fight and avenge the village) are open to the heroine. The second set of actions (learning to fight, to avenge the village, to recapture the harvest) traditionally belongs to the domain of the male Chinese hero; however, in the above passage, the old woman is offering the heroine the possibility of fulfilling the traditional Chinese obligations to her family, village and nation. Consequently, in the final sentence, the modal 'can' emphasizes the possibility of being remembered by the nation as an example of dutifulness.

In later passages, the heroine's duty is marked by deontic modals. For example, in the following passage, a double emphasis on obligation occurs when the modal 'would' is followed by 'have to':

By looking into the water gourd I was able to follow the men I would have to execute. (Kingston 1976: 30. Emphasis mine)

Moreover, fulfilment of one's duty can be enforced or self-motivated, as represented by the different modals in the following passage:

I saw the baron's messenger leave our house, and my father saying, "This time I must go and fight." I would hurry down the mountain and take his place. (Kingston 1976: 33. Emphasis mine)

'Must' conveys a high degree of obligation, and here, it is used in relation to an obligation that is unjustly enforced, as the heroine's father is too old to fight in wars. In contrast, the second modal 'would' suggests a willingness and decision on the narrator's part to serve as her father's substitute, out of filial piety.

The final paragraph of Kingston's Fa Mu Lan story is also characterised by a repetition of the modal 'would':

My mother and father and the entire clan would be living happily on the money I had sent them. My parents had bought their coffins. They would sacrifice a pig to the gods that I had returned. From the words on my back, and how they were fulfilled, the villagers would make a legend about my perfect filiality [sic]. (Kingston 1976: 45. Emphasis mine)

The past tense of these modals alert us to the dual time frames created by Kingston's retelling of the legend in first-person narration. Within the time frame of the legend, Fa Mu Lan manages to fulfil her obligations to her parents and her village; thus, the modals 'would' are epistemic and predictive. However, where the narrator 'I' is assumed to be Kingston, the passage is interpreted in the light of Kingston's own time and our awareness of her sense of failure as a Chinese daughter, causes us to retrospectively interpret the modals 'would' as not only signifying the past time of legend, but also the remoteness of the possibility of these events. In comparison, the present tense modal 'will' would suggest a much firmer future possibility. These past tense modals belong to the category of 'boulomaic modality' (Simpson 1993: 48): they convey a sense of desire on the narrator's part, a wish that these events were true.

The pattern of deontic and boulomaic modality in Kingston's retelling of the Fa Mu Lan legend indicates her desire to meet the cultural expectations embodied by the legendary heroine, who never relinquishes her female duties even as she manages to achieve significance in Chinese society. In fact, Kingston's retelling of the legend emphasizes that Fa Mu Lan's greatness lies in the fulfilment of her duties and her intense filial piety. Kingston only manages a vicarious achievement of the legend's status in her storytelling; in her own life, she remains burdened by the negative cultural meanings associated with the label of *the female child*. Thus, in the penultimate paragraph of the text, she falls back on the prototypical meaning of the lexeme *girl* evoked through the Chinese sayings when she concludes: 'But I am useless, one more girl who couldn't be sold' (Kingston 1976: 52).

6. Conclusion

In his analysis of proverbs and their relationship to global knowledge structures, White suggests that narrative comprehension 'frequently proceeds by using existing knowledge structures to process new information and draw inferences about the social and moral implications of what is said; in other words, to get the point' (1987: 152). In 'White Tigers', our understanding of its central issues relies heavily on our grasp of a prototypical meaning denoted by the lexemes *girl* or *daughter* in the text. This prototypical meaning must be interpreted within the context of traditional Chinese culture that is evoked through the translated Chinese sayings. Without it, the significance of Kingston's retelling of the legend of Fa Mu Lan would be lost. The occurrence of the majority of the sayings in the context of Kingston's comparison of her Chinese American experience against the achievements of Fa Mu Lan emphasizes the cultural idealizations contained in the legend and explains some of the difficulties Kingston faces in her attempts to counter the negative stereotyping of Chinese daughters.

This example of a second-language text suggests that when a writer successfully communicates his or her native reality, he or she may do so by drawing on specific cultural models to contribute the cultural connotations of words and linguistic structures. As my analysis of Kingston's text indicates, native meanings can be generated in a non-native language in the form of prototypical meanings based on a specific cultural framework. Part of the successful communication of such meanings depends on how the writer provides access to the cultural framework. In 'White Tigers', this is effected through the presence of cultural sayings, which serve as sources of cultural assumptions, and the legend of Fa Mu Lan.

The theory of semantic prototypes, by drawing attention to the models underlying the meanings of words, reminds us that we need to look beyond dictionary definitions to the way different cultures apply linguistic labels in describing reality. It also suggests that semantic prototypes are some of the forms that cultural meanings may take. Although such a theory represents only one approach to understanding the relationship between language and culture, its insights are crucial if we are to look beneath the surface of the text.

---

[1] The pinyin versions of the Chinese characters are enclosed in square brackets.

[2] The psychological reality of prototypes was first demonstrated by Rosch (1973) in her study of colour categories in Dani, a New Guinea language that has only two basic colour terms: *mili* and *mola*. Rosch discovered that when Dani speakers were asked for the best examples of *mili* and *mola*, they chose the focal colours in the range of colours designated by the colour terms. She named these focal colours cognitive reference points or prototypes.

[3] Apart from Lakoff's decriptions of *the working mother* and *the housewife*, there may be alternative meanings associated with such expressions: *the working mother* may be viewed positively, as a economic contributor or as one coping under difficult circumstances; on the other hand, *the housewife* may be negatively perceived as a non-wage-earner. However, Lakoff's observations highlight the fact that social stereotyping can affect our understanding and use of words.

[4] The clan in Chinese society is defined as all members with a common surname or family name, indicating that they are descended from the same ancestor. Traditionally, it is taboo to marry anyone with the same surname.

References

Austin J. 1962. How to Do Things with Words. New York: Oxford University Press.

Fillmore C. 1975. 'An alternative to checklist theories of meaning' in Proceedings of the First Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society. Berkeley: Berkeley Linguistics Society. 123 - 131.

Holland D. and N. Quinn (eds.) 1987. Cultural Models in Language and Thought. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hsu F. 1949. Under the Ancestors' Shadow: Chinese Culture and Personality. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Hsu F. 1981. Americans and Chinese: Passage to Differences. Third Edition. Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii.

Kachru B. 1982. 'Meaning in deviation: toward understanding non-native English texts' in B. Kachru (ed.) 1982. The Other Tongue. Oxford: Pergamon Press. 325 - 350.

Kingston M. 1976. 'White Tigers' in M. Kingston. 1976. The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts. London: Allen Lane: 19 - 53.

Kristeva J. 1986. About Chinese Women. (trans. A. Barrows.) New York: Marion Boyars.

Lakoff G. 1987. Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lee R. 1960. The Chinese in the United States of America. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Lyons J. 1981. Language and Linguistics: An Introduction. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Quinn N. and D. Holland. 1987. 'Culture and cognition' in Holland and Quinn (eds.) 1987: 3 - 42.

Rosch E. 1973. 'Natural categories'. Cognitive Psychology 4: 328 - 350.

Simpson P. 1993. Language, Ideology and Point of View. London: Routledge.

Sweetser E. 1987. 'The definition of lie: an examination of the folk models underlying a semantic prototype' in Holland and Quinn (eds.) 1987: 43 - 66.

Tsai S. 1986. The Chinese Experience in America. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Thumboo E. 1976. 'Introduction' in E. Thumboo (ed.) The Second Tongue: An Anthology of Poetry from Malaysia and Singapore. Singapore: Heinemann Educational Books (Asia) Ltd.: vii - xxxviii.

Tu W. 1985. 'Selfhood and otherness in Confucian thought' in A. Marsella, G. DeVos and F. Hsu (eds.) 1985. Culture and Self: Asian and Western Perspectives. New York: Tavistock Publications. 231-251.

White G. 1987. 'Proverbs and cultural models: an American psychology of problem solving' in Holland and Quinn (eds.) 1987: 151 - 172.

Wierzbicka A. 1992. Semantics, Culture, and Cognition: Universal Human Concepts in Culture-Specific Configurations. New York: Oxford University Press.